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ABSTRACT

It doesn't matter much whether a planning trend produces a large or small volume of literature; what matters is the probable half-life of the trend, that is, how long the ideas will last. To the planner, the longer the half-life of the trend, the more significant is the trend. (Author/WM)

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CURRENT TRENDS IN PLANNING AND THEIR EFFECT ON PLANNING LITERATURE

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CURRENT TRENDS IN PLANNING AND THEIR EFFECT ON PLANNING LITERATURE

(Address by Jerome L. Kaufman, Associate Director-Research, ASPO, to the 10th Annual Conference of the Council of Planning Librarians, April 19, 1969, Cincinnati, Ohio)

Observation 1. There are plenty of current planning trends: increasing sophistication of analytic techniques, advocacy planning, increasing planning specialization, strengthening of the metropolitan planning function, new towns, the rise of sub-city area planning bodies, increasing professionalization of zoning administration, planning--budget mergers, interest in a national urbanization policy, increasing state involvement in local planning and development affairs, etc. We can be fairly certain that most of these trends will be described, dimensioned, spelled out for their implications for practice, argued about, assessed, and eventually recorded as part of planning history. This means that we will be saved as a profession from "literary oblivion." We can delight in the anticipation of much planning literature to look forward to in future years.

Observation 2. There is not necessarily a direct relationship between the significance of a trend for planning and the number of words poured out about that trend in books, journals, technical reports, conference papers, staff memoranda, and assorted other medium loosely comprising what might be termed planning literature.

In fact, an insignificant trend (one that may generate a flurry of initial excitement but have no lasting effect on planning) may unleash a torrent of words in the planning literature, while a significant and important trend may produce but a trickle. Let me give you two examples. In the late 1950's, state planning enjoyed a renaissance. Dormant for many years, state planning agencies began to awake from their slumber and work in earnest to prepare comprehensive state development plans

and a variety of plans for statewide functions like open space, transportation, water resources, etc. Several lengthy tomes were written--among them one co-authored by the Council of State Governments and ASPO (in which I, alas, played a major role)--espousing the new gospel. Many reports were produced by state planning agencies aimed towards successful completion of comprehensive state development plans. But this trend never dug deep roots. The "new" state planning revival of the late 1960's has taken a far different turn towards management planning for the executive branch of state government. Policy planning, planning-program-budget systems, planning for services as well as facilities are all part of the current revival. State plans are somewhat passe.

On the other hand, very little attention is being given in the planning literature to two related trends that may have a tremendous impact on planning in the future. The first is the slow but steady movement in the direction of registration of planners. The second is AIP's decision to tighten its professional membership standards by requiring oral examinations for upgrading. Both trends may have lasting effect on the character and quality of planning manpower serving government and nongovernment agencies in the future. Yet, little is found in the planning literature on these trends.

Observation 3. Some current planning trends may indirectly result in reducing the total amount of planning literature produced in the future. For example, the trend towards making planning an integral part of government, weaving the planning function into the fabric of government, will reduce the total volume of planning literature. Let me explain. Aside from activating local planning--a commendable purpose--the 701 program (sanctioned by the 1954 Federal Housing Act), gave "body," or

more accurately "bulk," to planning libraries throughout the United States. The quality of the local planning program in the 1950's was partly measured by the mere existence of a printed plan and accompanying reports. Some 8,000 cities and counties under 50,000 population have received 701 grants since 1954. Assume that each 701 community produced an average of 300 pages of published material (economic and population study reports as well as the comprehensive plan report). The 701 program has then resulted in the production of 2,400,000 pages of printed or mimeographed material, enough--by my rough calculations--to fill up almost all the shelves in 1313's Joint Reference Library. But there is definitely a trend away from the production of plans per se. As planning agencies gravitate more and more towards the center of government and increasingly work "behind the scenes" to influence development decision-makers, their efforts will be less recordable in published reports. Why? Because much of their effort will be intangible--the provision of services, helping to solve current development problems, being in the right spot at the right time with the right information to influence critical development decisions. The tendency in the future will be to define local planning effectiveness in deeds not in reports. The effect on planning literature of this one trend: there may be less literature.

Observation 4. Some planning trends may alter the form of planning literature. I refer to the trend towards greater and greater sophistication of analytic techniques employed by planners. CRP simulation model reports, some issues of the AIP Journal, books like Urban Growth Dynamics, or the Regional Science Journal tend to make more and more use of mathematical equations and formulas. Instead of "deathless"

prose with proper subject, verb, and object components, we will see more numbers and letters which describe crucial relationships within the city and among its working parts. A new handwriting may be evolving in the planning literature.

Observation 5. The increasing volume of planning literature is in itself a trend in planning. It already is having the effect of producing the need for "short cuts" to information. Merely to keep up with all that is being published, we have found it necessary to do more abstracting, prepare more bibliographies and short commentaries. The Research Digest, Scientific Information Exchange, the Council of Planning Librarians Bibliographies, URBANDOC, UPDATE (the Information Company of America's Bi-Monthly Review of Recent Developments Concerning Municipalities), the Commerce Clearing House, Urban Affairs Reporter, the AIP Information and Documents Exchange Program, and ASPO's Newsletter, "Of Note" column are all responses to the prolific output of planning literature in the past decade. While comprising net additions to the planning literature, the short cuts to information serve a useful purpose. Undoubtedly, we will see more of them in the future.

Observation 6. Having said all this, in the final analysis it doesn't much matter whether a planning trend produces a large or small volume of literature, whether it alters the form of planning literature or not. What matters, as the late Dennis O'Harrow said in his March, 1965, ASPO Newsletter editorial, is the probable half-life of the trend. He described the half-life concept in terms of the radioactivity of polonium. Within the first six months of its extraction, polonium loses

half its radioactivity. At the end of the second six months, radioactivity is halved again down to one-fourth of the original potency, and so on until the stage where the radioactivity is so minute, it can no longer be measured. Taking some liberties with the concept, O'Harrow said that the only proper way to measure the continued usefulness of the ideas in a book is by their probable half-life. In other words, how long will the ideas last?

To the planner, the longer the half-life of the trend the more significant that trend. O'Harrow says "it really is not all that serious if you never get around to ploughing through every deadly dull article in every dull publication that shows up on your desk. The trick is not to judge a book by its cover, but by its half-life."

To the librarian, the half-life concept is also quite important. Again let me quote from O'Harrow: "Documentation (classifying, indexing, and storage of printed materials) tends to embalm and preserve great quantities of stuff that were better left to disappear through the natural processes of decay. There is much to be said for book-burning."

There is one reassuring thought that I can leave you with. There are approximately 40 people in this room. Assume that the ideas in my speech have a half-life of one day. By the end of Sunday, only 20 people will remember any part of my speech. By the end of the Conference, on Thursday, only one and one-quarter of the people here will remember any part of my speech. More than likely, I will be that one person, but who among you will admit to be that quarter of a person? Ponder that for a half-life and have a good conference.

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